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Symeon Stylites: His three *Lives* as versions of history

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *christian ascetism, medieval history, Symeon Stylites, Theodoret bishop of Cyrrhus, ἄγιος Συμεών Στυλίτης, χριστιανικός ασκητισμός*

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Abstract

Μια από τις πιο αμφιλεγόμενες θρησκευτικές προσωπικότητες των πρώτων Χριστιανικών αιώνων είναι ο ἄγιος Συμεών Στυλίτης. Οι ακραίες πρακτικές του σηματοδότησαν το κίνημα του χριστιανικού ασκητισμού και συνέβαλαν στην ορισμό του ως προτύπου αγιότητας την περίοδο εκείνη. Ωστόσο οι αγιογραφίες με θέμα τη ζωή του δε χρησίμευσαν μόνο ως μέσα για την αποτύπωση των πρακτικών του και την καθιέρωση της αγιότητας του, ἀλλα και ως καθρέπτες και ταυτόχρονα δημιουργοί κοινωνικών, πολιτικών και θρησκευτικών στερεοτύπων, ειδικά σε μια περίοδο που η Χριστιανική θρησκεία ακόμα διαμορφωνόταν σε μείζονα διάσταση της καθημερινής ζωής. Τέλος, τα αγιολογικά αυτά κείμενα δημιουργούνται σύμφωνα με τις πεποιθήσεις των συγγραφέων τους, δίνοντάς στο σημερινό αναγνώστη την ευκαιρία να προσεγγίσει ένα ιστορικό φαινόμενο από τρεις διαφορετικές σκοπιές.

Prologue

The focal point of the present essay is the three Lives of Symeon Stylites, a Syrian monk of the 5th century. Symeon was notorious to his contemporaries for his extreme ascetic practices that ensured a great reputation for him, in an expanded area, reaching Britain and Ethiopia.¹ His mortification practices brought a keen audience to him, even before he realized what made him even more popular, his ascent on a pillar. The sources give different numbers for the height of this column. Nevertheless, it is quite common to accept that it reached, at its final stage, 20 meters height (40 cubits).²

This treatise does not focus on the reasons for Symeon's ascent. These have been studied thoroughly, leaving us however still quite uncertain. That the ascent was a novelty in the mortification practices of those times is certain. His biographers try to explain his actions, each in a different way. Theodoret asserts that his decision was an attempt to avoid the crowds that were gathering around him and did not let him pray in peace. He also claims that this did not happen without "divine dispensation", and explains it as an action that would attract even the most unfaithful to the Christian truth, and convince them.³ On the other hand, the writers of the Syrian Life claim that he wanted to please God through self-punishment.⁴ In addition, by ascending to the pillar he would «awaken the world from the heavy torpor of its inhabitants and have the name of his divinity praised through his believers'.⁵ Today, the theories concerning this action also vary. Was his ascent an imitation of ancient practices of those regions

¹ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, Translated by Robert Doran, Foreword by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Cistercian Publications, Calamazoo Michigan, 1992, pp. 69, 74 (Theodoret), p. 175 (Syriac).

² *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, p.16-17.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 75-76.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 127-9

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 180.

(φαλλοβάτεις)?⁶ Was it due to the specific features of the Syrian idiosyncrasy that considered self-punishment and extreme imitation of Christ's life as the only means for purification?

Whatever the reasons for Symeon's behavior, the result was that he was very popular even at the very early stages of his "career". In this paper we will discuss the characteristics of his life and activity that attracted his fans' attention. We cannot depend only on his hagiographers' records concerning the direct reasons they give us for his popularity. It is not enough to take their word that the only reason he attracted such big crowds was his sanctity. It is sensible to assume that this wave of worship had its foundations in the people's needs and beliefs. The crowds adored him and paid their respects to him because he represented truths already known and accepted by them.

On this basis, these hagiographies are approached as an interaction of cultural-political-religious subjects: the hagiographers on the one hand and the crowds on the other. The hagiographers in each case represent an important part of the History, an «option»; of it, as they are the ones who form it, by writing it, in regard to their personal and social features. As children of their times, they give a clear picture of their contemporary society through the way they choose to interpret the facts. Therefore in Symeon's case there are three different presentations of him, three different interpretations of his holiness, three different opinions regarding a famous personality, consequently three points of view, recorded at the same period, in the same area. Therefore, there are three different presentations of people's beliefs and thoughts.

The three sources are all contemporary hagiographies, by authors who had personal communication with Symeon, and eye-witness knowledge of the facts. The first one is «The Life of Symeon Stylites», by Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, contained in "Φιλόθεος Ιστορία" ("Religious History"), and compiled in 444 AD. The "Religious History" contains the Lives of thirty Syrian saints of the 4th and 5th centuries, ten of whom were still alive when he was writing his work. It is written in Greek. The English text I have used is the translation of the "Sources Chretiennes" (Paris, 1977-9) edition, which was based on seventeen different manuscripts, dating from the 9th to the 14th century. The second source is *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of Blessed Symeon the Stylite*, supposedly by Antonius, one of his disciples. Date and provenance are unknown. It is also written in Greek. The text I used is the translation of the "Das Leben des heiligen Symeon Stylites" edition (Leipzig, 1908), an edition based on eleven manuscripts, dating from the 10th to the 15th century. The last source is *The Syriac Life of Saint Symeon Stylites*; the "official life", described as "a long panegyric".⁷ It is dated to 473 and written in Syriac. The writer is unknown, although some scholars believe that this Life was a work of his disciples. The English text is a translation of the Vatican manuscript (dated to 473 AD).⁸ There are also other manuscripts dated to the 5th and 6th centuries.

Theodoret's Life

⁶ *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Arthur Voobus, C.S.C.O. Subsidia Tomus 17, Louvain, 1960, p. 214.

⁷ Voobus, p. 209.

⁸ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, pp. 45, 66. It seems that we actually have the authentic manuscript, or at least an apograph. Even if this is not the case, this is certainly a very early copy, written only 14 years after Symeon's death.

The writer of the first Life available is Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, in the province of Ephratensis. He was famous in his times for his activity both as a bishop and as a theologian.⁹ These two features of his life appear in the text under the cloak of hagiography.

Born in 393, he was dedicated to God from his birth, since his conception was thought to be a result of the prayers of a famous hermit and his mother's conversion from the worldly life.¹⁰ After spending some time as a monk in a monastery in Apameia, he became a bishop in 423. From the beginning of his career he showed great interest and care for the hermits of his diocese.¹¹ He was also known for his missionary enthusiasm.¹² This appears as one of the prevalent characteristics of his hagiography of Symeon, as will be analyzed below. Close examination of the source shows that his main focal points were the converting activity of Symeon and the demonstration of his human nature. The second matter is in close relationship to Theodoret's participation in the Christological disputes of his times. This was a period of restlessness in the Church, with the controversies concerning the true nature of Christ dividing the theologians, the clergymen and the whole Empire. Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, insisted on the completeness of Christ's humanity, disapproving of the use of the word "Θεοτόκος" (Mother of God) for Mary, and asserting that Christ was two distinct persons, since he had two natures. His rival, Cyril of Alexandria, representing the Alexandrian theological school, disagreed and became Nestorius' and the Antiochean school's main opponent. The Council of Ephesus in 431 deposed Nestorius and labelled him a heretic. The deposition of his followers, amongst who were Theodoret as well as other Antiochean theologians, followed some years after, by the Robber Council at Ephesus in 449. Although Theodoret finally condemned Nestorius in order to promote his restoration, evidence of his theological aspect is easily detected in the present source.

Theodoret mainly stresses two characteristics of Symeon's life. Firstly, the saint's human nature and its transgression through devotion to God. Symeon was a saint, but what made him a saint were not only his miracles, but also his endurance and power over his bodily wills. Secondly, stresses his converting action. This is also the reason he climbed on the pillar, to promote the proselytism of the "barbarians" as the non-initiates to Christianity are often called in the *Life*.

This ideal of the ascetic as the point where the human and the holy meet¹³ is spread throughout the text and is one of its main characteristics. Its beginnings can be detected in earlier ascetic practices, such as primitivism. Life close to nature, combined with mortification, not only ensured true repentance¹⁴ but also transformed suffering into treasure, with sufferers being honored both by men and God.¹⁵ The monk was transcending the limitations of human nature through divine grace.¹⁶ Theodoret gives an idea of his point of view right at the beginning of the

⁹ *Theodoret as Exeget of the Old Testament*, G. W. Ashby, Grahamstown, 1972, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹¹ *A History of the Monks of Syria* ("Religious History") by Theodoret of Cyrrhus; translated with an introduction and notes by R. M. Price. Imprint Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1985, p. xii.

¹² Ashby, p. 5.

¹³ *Asceticism and society in crisis, John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints*, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, London, 1990, p. 14.

¹⁴ Voobus, p.27.

¹⁵ *The Suffering Self, Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, Judith Perkins, London 1995, p. 206.

¹⁶ *A History of the Monks of Syria*, p. xxxi.

Life, by describing the events that follow as “surpassing the human nature”.¹⁷ He aims at proving the human inside the holy, the earthly character of sanctity. As Jesus was a man, and had two distinguished natures, the human and the divine, so too was the saint above all human. This is the first aspect of Theodoret’s hagiography. It seems at this first stage that the writer addresses the followers of Christianity, since they are the ones who are educated in divine things and are ready to believe him. These are the ones who can understand that his holiness is exactly this, that he achieves the subordination of his weak body to the mind. By stressing the human features he makes his point successfully. When he describes Symeon’s fast during Lent, he insists on underlining the natural results of such a hardship.¹⁸ Symeon is not a saint because he goes through it without any difficulty, but exactly because he almost falls dead from the effort. His human nature is underlined as the most significant component of his sanctity. This is what always appears in front of him, in the form of temptation which he defeats by attaching a chain to his foot, while the other end is fastened on a rock. Another point that strengthens Theodoret’s argument concerning Symeon’s endurance is his patience in sustaining the inconvenience caused by insects in his skin, after an affliction by the chain.¹⁹

After an intervening section of describing the way of life, various events and miracles, Theodoret returns to the point of Symeon’s physical endurance. The writer refers to his own admiration of the saint’s personal strength, and records the practices Symeon follows and the results of their extremity in detail.²⁰

His achievements are such that people wonder whether he is “a human or an incorporeal nature”.²¹ Symeon has to show his ulcer to the man who questions his humanity, and also assure him that he eats, in order to convince him about his human nature. Finally, by his death he demonstrates that he was human, leaving no doubts.²²

The second point Theodoret stresses is Symeon’s converting action. First of all, his ascent on the pillar was by God’s will, so that the unfaithful would ask the reasons for this unusual action and “depart (from the spectacle) instructed in divine affairs”.²³ This specific event, of standing on the pillar, was what “enlightened” the crowds of barbarians that came to see him- to such an extent that the tribes would fight in front of his pillar for his blessing.²⁴ The account is quite extraordinary in that the conversion stories are directly related to miracles as to that the miracle is the conversion itself. Symeon caused many conversions, together with the introduction of the monastic ideal to the Arabs.²⁵ Therefore, while there are only two narrations of miracles –both of which in connection to unfaithful Arabs- the narratives of facts in relation to his recognition as a saint by the “barbarians” are four.²⁶

¹⁷ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 74.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 81.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 82.

²² *Ibid*, p. 83.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 76.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 78.

²⁵ Voobus, p. 222.

²⁶ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, Miracles: chapters 16, 18. Facts: chapters 14, 15, 20, 21.

Although there are other features that Theodoret records (the imitation of Christ²⁷, his role as a mediator and adviser²⁸) his persistence on these two, the converting action and the discipline of the body makes them the most important topics of discussion and demonstration in this source. This is not a coincidence; Theodoret's life was marked by the Christological controversies of his times. His whole ideology could not but appear in every aspect of his career, mainly in hagiography. The famous example of a saint who manages to surpass himself and the limitations of his nature would be the proof that the theologian needed in order to convince everyone about the truth of his theory. Therefore the hagiography in Theodoret's hands becomes something like a theological treatise.²⁹ Another element of Theodoret's life appearing in the text is the role of Symeon as a proselytizing spectacle. Theodoret was famous for his converting action, and this was his main care as a bishop. It could not surprise us that his attention was drawn to this aspect of Symeon's sanctity and this was what he chose to stress the most.

Antonius' Life:

In Antonius' Life there is a different approach. Similarities exist in a few points, namely the imitation of Christ and Symeon's legendary childhood –the resemblance with the prophets of the Old Testament.³⁰[30] There are also some references to his fame amongst the (unfaithful) Arabs,³¹ though only superficially; these are not the points on which the hagiographer chooses to focus. The saint here appears as a more spiritual figure. The rebirth of the holy man after his introduction to the extreme practices and absolute dedication to God is symbolized by the dissolution of earthly links, initially his relation with his parents. By disappearing and not giving any information about his family when he is asked by the abbot,³² as though it did not exist, Symeon frees himself from earthly bounds and prepares for a higher spiritual life. His devotion to God makes him a "teacher", regarding his relationship with the abbot,³³ a commonplace in hagiography. Therefore, his transition from the world to the service of God points out his transformation to a spiritual figure. Although this account is the most detailed one regarding Symeon's natural hardships and their results, these references seem to point at a presentation of his humanity other than the one we saw in Theodoret's case.

The text aims mainly at underlining the idea of wholeness that Symeon represented. This applies on two levels. First of all, Symeon "stands between God and the human kind".³⁴ As concerns the miracles he performed, he claims not to be the subject of his actions, but only the intermediary between God and men. Miracles are performed by God, not by the saint.³⁵ This is a natural consequence of his imitation of Christ. But Symeon is presented mostly as the link that unites the human and the animal worlds. His relation to the animals is one of protection and "reconciliation" with the human kind. Therefore, just after his removal from the monastery, he

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 78.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 83.

²⁹ Further examination of the whole of Theodoret's hagiographical collection would prove or disprove the point I am trying to make here. But this could not be done in this essay, because my purpose is only to give some points of consideration –and focus specifically on the accounts concerning Symeon.

³⁰ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, pp. 41, 87, 89, 92.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 94, 98.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 88-89.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 43, 91.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 92.

resides in a well full of serpents, scorpions and insects of every kind.³⁶ This place, which is described as full of “hordes of wild beasts”, becomes his hermitage. Later on, in chapter 15, Symeon’s power over the animal kingdom is revealed when a hind stands still at the hearing of his name. But his power appears also as a punishment when those who eat the unlucky hind become dumb, as a consequence of this sinful action.

The series of events that certify this conception of Symeon as uniting the human and the animal world goes on. The woman who swallows a serpent by mistake is saved and the serpent extracted by him, in chapter 16. This image is strengthened by his patience when he allows and encourages the worms that eat his flesh to continue and “eat what the Lord has given to them”.³⁷ These words seem to realize the conception of human as dust, returning to dust, and being consumed by worms. Nonetheless, it supports the saint’s role as a continuation of the rural patron role. The rural patron is the force invoked in order to rearrange the natural relations between man and his environment. Symeon has exactly this function, first of all because of his special relation with nature. This relation enables him to control it by intervening whenever it is necessary. The natural elements recognize this power and obey to his will. The dragon referred in chapter 19 finds his cure lying in front of Symeon’s enclosure. He stays there for three days, quiet like a sheep, waiting to be completely healed. Symeon’s power applies to every worldly creature, and all this by the service of God. When he saves the area from drought³⁸ he functions exactly like the pagan gods, whose main responsibility was to maintain balance in natural phenomena for the sake of the crop. Finally, the “wholeness” that Symeon stands for is manifested in the description of his death: “the whole creation”, men and animals, mourn.³⁹ Additionally, his corpse cannot be divided in order to be venerated because this would be opposite to the conception of him as the source of unity.⁴⁰

Therefore, God is omnipotent through Symeon who has power over the natural elements -and the other way round. The combination of pagan beliefs with the Christian dogma must have been essential in this area and at this period, since the remains of pagan beliefs were still in existence. The latest pagan inscription found in the country-side around Antioch is dated to 367/8, while the earliest Christian is dated to 336/7.⁴¹ The competition between the different perceptions of God bore syncretism, in order for Christianity to attract new fans.

Even though previous studies claim that during its Byzantine period Syria was an entirely Christian country,⁴² it seems that modern scholars argue the opposite. H. Drijvers maintains that “the Syrian area has never been a cultural unity and therefore it has displayed a variety of religious traditions”,⁴³ providing the examples of Heliopolis remaining pagan for a long time while Antioch was one of the first Christian centers. He also adds that the country side -which always follows the changes after some time- was Christianized during the 4th and 5th centuries,

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 90-91.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 94.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 97.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 45, 98.

⁴¹ *A History of the Monks of Syria*, p. xix.

⁴² *History of Syria*, Philip K. Hitti, London, 1951, p. 363.

⁴³ *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the formative period*, Edited by Nina Garsoian, Thomas Mathews, Robert W. Thomson, Washington DC, 1982, p. 35

through the efforts of the monks and ascetics.⁴⁴ It is not hard to read between the lines if we keep in mind the position on which Symeon chose to raise his pillar: outside Antioch, a great commercial and cultural center. In addition, the pillar was on the road to Seih Barakat, the most important religious center of the area, and very close to an old pagan temple. This raises questions not only regarding his supposed wish for “solitude”, but also concerning economic benefits⁴⁵ and converting activity. This place must have been very popular amongst the pagans, and surely a man standing on a pillar would not escape notice. A *Life* based on the hermit’s relation to the natural elements, echoing the pagan rural gods, certainly had place in this setting.

Since Christianity “spread among people whose links with natural society were loose, whereas it was slow in spreading among peasantry”,⁴⁶ it would not be a mistake to interpret the use of the pillar as phallic symbolism. This connection would accelerate the acceptance of the new religion⁴⁷ in the countryside. The creation of saints who would carry on the ancient pagan traditions aimed at bringing the peasants close to Christianity, since the saint-cult could flourish away from the Church and its sacraments therefore develop amongst Bedouins, pagans and Christians.⁴⁸

There is a point though that seems not to agree with the theory presented above: the language in which the *Life* was written. The fact that the writer chose Greek means two things: first, that he was educated; second, that he was addressing educated audience. In Theodoret’s case, the use of Greek is in step with the purposes of his work. The peasants probably could not care less about the natures that existed inside Christ. Such conversations were a privilege of the educated and flourished among the clergy. Therefore, Theodoret wrote in order to convince this group of people about his ideology concerning the human and the divine inside Christ. This seems to make sense, as the approach coincides with the objective. But what about Antonius’ case? If he wanted to appeal to the peasantry, he would have used vernacular language, for them to understand. Instead he wrote in Greek, for the higher classes to read; yet the higher classes were supposed to have been already initiated to Christianity in this area by this time, if one accepts the arguments in the previous paragraph. Do we have here a document that proves this (partially or wholly) wrong?

Syriac Life

This problem does not exist as far as the Syriac *Life* is concerned. Here the language is vernacular, which means the work was written for a wide audience. As a consequence, it could be expected that the interests of the laity are more emphasized. There are of course the elements of the two previous hagiographies, namely the connection of the saint with the natural environment and the relation between body and spirit, as well as Symeon’s proselytizing activity. Nonetheless, his image as a judge and punisher is my focal point of this examination.

⁴⁴ *East of Byzantium*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ Initially, my thoughts concerning the meaning of the site’s choice arose during a seminar about *The price of sanctity: The economics of Cult and Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* in a talk titled Solitary or Celebrity? Simeon Stylites and the pillar at the crossroads by Emma Loosley. (University of Manchester, 12 February 2005) This is also where I got the topographical information.

⁴⁶ *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, J. S. Trimingham, London, 1979. p. 206.

⁴⁷ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, see references in p. 31. Also, Voobus, p. 214.

⁴⁸ Trimingham, p. 233.

Many miracles are connected with Symeon's power over the animal world.⁴⁹ In some instances, he has control over natural phenomena, such as drought.⁵⁰ The appearance of wild beasts close to the unfaithful people of Lebanon is explained as the consequence of their worship of the idols. Symeon saves them from nature's anger by converting them.⁵¹ His miracles instigate large numbers of unbelievers to conversion.⁵² These points are all common with the other two hagiographies. The theme of bodily wills and spiritual predominance over them appears here once again.⁵³ His endurance puts him amongst the great figures of the Old Testament - Moses, Elijah and Daniel- all of whom Symeon surpasses.⁵⁴ This is where the writer, by connecting Symeon with all these persons, justifies his ascent on the pillar, as a continuation of older practices. This is a common place in all three hagiographies; whether it reflects the common belief or the writers of the Lives were influenced from each other it is difficult to say. The main point, in the end, is that he is thought to be a successor to the Holy men of the Old Testament by all of the social classes represented in these three *Lives*.

The uniqueness of the Syriac Life rests in the dominance of Symeon's image as an organ of divine justice upon human wrong. Symeon is the defender of the poor against abuse. God's will –the care of the poor- is realized through the saint's interposition. Imitating Christ, he cherishes the weak by providing them with food, and following His commands he gives his fortune to the poor.⁵⁵ His presence as an ambassador of God's wills has three dimensions: he supports the poor; he preserves divine order on earth, through control of the Church and spreading of its doctrine; and he punishes injustice. The elements of protection and punishment especially appear throughout the text, consecutively. Probably these features were what made him famous amongst the peasantry, since this *Life* is the one addressing a larger audience. Therefore, it lays emphasis on what mostly interested the common people; consequently in this text we have more evidence concerning the reasons of his fame.

Initially, a divine command to "be concerned about the poor and the oppressed" urges him to ascetic life.⁵⁶ Here Symeon appears as a social revolutionary, following closely the steps of Christ by focusing on the salvation of "those who suffer violence cruelly at the hands of their fellow men". This seems to be a much more complete image of imitation of Christ than the ones we have seen previously, since now it actually concentrates on Christ's beliefs and action, rather than His miracles, as happens with the other Lives. The perfect imitation of Christ agrees absolutely with "the essential continuity in Syrian asceticism going back to the example of Christ" and following step by step the Gospel writings.⁵⁷ The clearest evidences of this role are the cases of him intervening for the sake of the poor, regarding high taxation. We are informed that about three hundred Antiocheans came to him, to ask his interposition concerning the matter, and in another case many came from the region of Nicopolis.⁵⁸ This happened because it was common knowledge that "his word was acceptable both to the great and small".

⁴⁹ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, pp. 115, 119, 140, 166, 167, 168.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 155.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 141-143.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 159.

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 129-135.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 176-178.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 109-110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 126-127, also p. 138.

⁵⁷ *A History of the Monks of Syria*, p. xxi. *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, pp. 135-137.

His influence is once again stressed in chapter 106, when the writer informs us about his fame not only among the ordinary, lay people, but also among the royal courts, both in the East and the West. This authority gives him the right even to threaten emperor Theodosius, in order to fulfill the people's request for justice and to satisfy divine will.⁵⁹ Modern scholars explain this authority through the "performative nature" of ascetic practices. Through mortification and self-marginalization the ascetic obtains the power of an intermediary.⁶⁰ Since he is both a part of the society and outside it, he is invested with a balancing authority, serving on the one hand the humans and on the other God.⁶¹ This comes in absolute opposition to the ascetics' supposed will to obey God completely, without external annoyances and to retire from society. The ascetic practice leads to exactly the opposite result, the perception of them as someone between earth and Heaven, someone who can "fix" the injustices of the world and protect the flock in the name of God.⁶² The ascetic is thought to be part of the community, and as a rule belongs to the poor and the weak,⁶³ therefore his main care is their patronage.

More than protector, Symeon is a judge. It is not so common in hagiography for the saint not to forgive the sinners. In his case, the punishment falls mainly to the powerful who exploit the poor population but also on those who threaten the Church of Christ. Even the monk, who tests him in the monastery, at the early stages of his career, suffers the consequences through divine penalty.⁶⁴ The concept of justice is spread throughout the whole narration. First of all, the abovementioned officers responsible for high taxation are all punished. Secondly, in an ambiguous account of some poor man's field being destroyed and consequently leaving him hungry, the culprit is equally punished (chapter 39). Thirdly, a deacon who makes a joke about Symeon and his supposed possessions drops dead some days after as a result of this sacrilege (chapter 92). Similarly, the penalty comes in cases of faithlessness, uncovering Symeon's converting activity, as in the event of the punishment of the fire-worshipper, whose misfortunes turned many to Christianity.⁶⁵ In the incident I have mentioned above related to the Lebanese, the wild beasts come to them as a result of their atheism –in this case Symeon intervenes in order to make the reason of the punishment known and to restore order. He also mediates to protect the flock,⁶⁶ accomplishing the instructions he had got at the beginning of his ascetic career, to fight for the interests of the Christian Church.⁶⁷

Epilogue

The *Syriac Life* can be seen as a combination of the two others, with the element of judgement added. Both Symeon as an extreme personality, and the social components that lead to the birth of the ascetic practices, could be studied endlessly. The present essay attempts only an epigrammatic demonstration of the factors that contributed to his fame, mainly concerning the rural population. It seems that the *Syriac Life* and Antonius' account provide us with more

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 190-191.

⁶⁰ *The emergence of monasticism, From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, Marilyn Dynn, Oxford, 2000, p. 20.

⁶¹ *A History of the Monks of Syria*, p. xxviii.

⁶² Harvey, pp. 13-14.

⁶³ *The Byzantine Saint*, edited by Sergei Hackel, London, 1981, p. 28.

⁶⁴ *The Lives of Symeon Stylites*, p. 113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 153-155.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 147-149.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 127

evidence than Theodoret does regarding this social class. Although, as it has been asserted previously, those who write History are the ones who form it, therefore we mostly have personal statements rather than objective descriptions, it is feasible to read through the lines and reconstruct “reality” to some extent. And in “reality”, the features of the acting masses.

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